

THE METHOD LEADS TO BADNESS

By Wendy Horwitz September 4, 1994

OXFORD, ENGLAND -- In a serene medieval courtyard of Oxford University, a sudden shriek rings out. An assailant, gritting his teeth, is pulling a woman by her hair. He drops her on the lawn. Tears roll down her cheeks as he grabs her and says, "Harlot, rare, notable harlot, that with thy brazen face maintainst thy sin."

No one comes to her aid. Across the courtyard, two lovers gaze into each other's eyes. The young woman speaks:

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea,

"My love as deep; the more I give to thee

"The more I have, for both are infinite."

And 10 yards away, an angry woman shakes her fist wildly and says, "Hie thee to hell for shame, and leave this world, thou cacodemon!"

These people have two things in common: They are actors and they are American. Along with scores of their compatriots, including me, they journeyed to England this summer to get something that's hard to come by back home: solid classical training. While their friends were turning their thoughts to the beach, these aspiring actors put their careers on

hold and paid \$3,000 apiece to sequester themselves here for four weeks.

"If you can handle the classics, you can handle anything," said Pamela Sherman of Bethesda, who turned down several job opportunities to come here along with four other Washington area actors.

My reasons for signing up were much like the others'. I had moved to London with my husband, after spending the last three years working on Capitol Hill as chief of staff for Rep. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.). But before my political career, I had worked as an actress in New York, and coming to London, with its vibrant theatrical scene, made me want to perform again.

Once I got here, my training in the classics, both at Boston University and at a theater school in New York, began to seem terribly inadequate. The British have such command of the language, even in works written hundreds of years ago, and here I was among them. I knew I needed more classical training if I was ever going to perform onstage here.

And so to Oxford, where I joined 120 other Americans in queueing up to get tips from such eminent names as Jeremy Irons, Sir Derek Jacobi and Alan Rickman. (I was in the advanced section; there were also intermediate and beginners courses.)

Much of American acting is rooted in Konstantin Stanislavski's "Method," which teaches a performer to get at the character's emotion first and worry about the words later. Such instructors as Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner taught generations of American actors to succeed onstage by digging deep into their psychological backgrounds.

In contrast, at London's British American Drama Academy the emphasis is on the importance of the text and using more of the voice and body to create the emotional heights.

The group ranged from a 19-year-old just out of high school to a 26-year-old who had recently had a leading role in a Washington Shakespeare Company production and had worked on Broadway. But almost all of us had one thing in common: not enough classical training.

So what is the British secret to performing Shakespeare? Celebrated British actors like Jacobi, Irons, Miriam Margolyes and Fiona Shaw, all of whom taught classes, offered the same advice. Focus on the words and what they mean, they told us. Don't psychoanalyze so much. Take the emphasis off of yourself and don't decide in advance what the emotion "should" be. Let the language affect you. And for God's sake don't be so afraid of the ghost of Olivier.

At Meisner's Neighborhood Playhouse in New York, where I studied, they would have called much of that advice blasphemous. To get to the right emotional pitch for a scene, I sometimes would lock myself in a room there and relive the last moments of my father's life in a hospital, focusing on every detail from his last gasps for breath to the smell of his cologne. Once I had emerged, a mass of tears, the teachers would tell me, "Now say the words."

Now I began trying to enjoy the words first, to feel the different colors and sounds that they made.

Daily, there were rigorous lessons in voice and movement, as well as Shakespeare classes in which we were told first to free our voices and relax our bodies. One teacher from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art

told us to throw our heads and hands back, shouting out from the depths of our bellies, "Oh, yes!" filling the room with sound. Another teacher had us touch an inanimate object and project the sound it suggested to us so we would get more in touch with the range of our voices.

George Hall, one of Laurence Olivier's Shakespeare coaches, counseled us to dissect every word and line in the text so we would know precisely what every character is thinking and feeling throughout. To many students, this seemed tedious and too basic. In our impatience, we just wanted to get up and play scenes with our partners.

But Hall was insistent. The trap that many actors fall into, he said, is in registering an emotion without understanding what the words mean. So an actor might read that Hamlet is angry and work himself into a frenzy, he said, but still leave the audience thinking, "What the hell did he just say?" If the actor doesn't know, the audience won't either.

Some teachers from the Royal Shakespeare Company told us to focus on understanding the rhythm of Shakespeare's measured verse, which was written in iambic pentameter. For me, this was the most difficult challenge. After my Shakespeare classes, I would roam the courtyards aimlessly, practicing my lines while counting on my fingers.

For one Washingtonian, Jennifer Albright, focusing on rhythm and breathing was a breakthrough. Albright was working on the poison scene from "Romeo and Juliet" when a British actor told her to relax, lower her voice and pick up her pace. Albright started again. By the end, tears rolled down her face and her breathing registered excitement.

"One technical clue about breathing and rhythm changed everything for me," said Albright, who had studied at the District's Duke Ellington School of the Arts and has performed at the Arena, Source and Round House theaters.

My own breakthrough came one morning in a quiet room off a secluded courtyard. Thirteen other students and I were told to spread out on the floor. Catherine Charlton, a vocal coach, asked us to focus on the classical passage we had brought to class. "Think of a line and give it a general active verb description like freeing, hating, skipping or whatever comes to mind," she said.

I had chosen the last scene of "Saint Joan," in which Joan of Arc asks to be burned at the stake rather than be locked away forever in a jail cell where she would never again see the beauty of life. The line was "Light your fire," and my descriptive verb was "freeing."

Concentrate on what the word does to your breathing, Charlton said. Say the word over and over, louder and louder, moving your body.

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What did she mean? My head was pounding, and my heart was beating fast. The room had become an annoying mass of moaning and groaning people, their bodies twirling, their fists banging on walls.

But as I concentrated on the word "freeing," I began to feel joyful. It was as if I were flying -- and suddenly I burst out crying. My teacher then asked me to say my original line from the text. Amazingly, "Light your fire" had taken on a new emotional life.

At the end of four weeks we left with new contacts and a lot more confidence, eager to start auditioning and using what we had learned. No longer did Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Juliet or Ophelia seem so intimidating.

But opportunities to do Shakespeare in the United States can be few and far between. And there were some who worried that when that big chance finally came, they would not be able to conjure up the technique they had learned from the masters.

"Don't worry," the RSC's Bill Homewood assured us. Then he smiled and let us in on a secret. "When all else fails," he said, "put Vick's VapoRub under your eyes to make them water before an emotional scene."